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Film Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 4. (Summer, 1974), pp. 17-24.

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ALAN WILLIAMS

Structures of Narrativity in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*

This study will attempt a narrative analysis of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* using concepts developed by A.-G. Greimas, particularly those of his "Eléments d'une grammaire narrative" (Paris: Le Seuil, in *Du Sens*). Greimas's system of analysis posits three fundamentally distinct levels in any text: a "deep" structure of meaning (similar to Levi-Strauss's notion in myth analysis but based on a dynamic model of generation rather than a static set of paradigms), an anthropomorphic level (shifts generated by the model become "actions" performed by "characters"), and finally the level of inscription in which the narrative is presented in whatever matter of expression chosen (in this case the filmic text as "read"). Rather than explain in detail Greimas's theory and then proceed to Lang, we will begin the analysis of *Metropolis,* introducing theoretical points as they become relevant. To this end we will begin with a preliminary "reading" of the film in Greimasian terms (primarily at the "anthropomorphic" level), then proceed to an attempt at formalization of the narrative structure (the "deep" level), and finally place the text in other systems of discourse, the "texts" of culture and ideology (using mainly the level of the inscription).

Metropolis begins with a segment (a self-contained bit of expression read as a separate unit) which appears totally expository—having, however, a definite function in the narrative. Greimas points out, after Propp, that all narratives must begin with a *manque,* a lack of some sort. In many of Perrault's fairy tales this is a lack of food; in the Russian folk-tales analyzed by Propp it is the kidnapping of the king's daughter. Lang's film begins with a depiction of the totally alienated condition of the workers, their lack of control or even contact with their own conditions of existence. This lack marks the workers as the film's first "subject" or hero (as a collective unit), although their function as actant, as performer of a set of operations, changes in the course of the film, as we will see. (The lack posited by Greimas is, of course, similar to the "problem" considered as the root of narrative in texts on the short story or on scriptwriting. Greimas's notion has the advantage, however, of being more concrete from the point of view of analysis and comparison, if not of story-writing. It is easier to compare the lack of two specific objects than to compare two problems defined in different terms, giving a greater power of critical generalization.)

One of the other major devices of all narrative is also introduced in this first segment, but in a non-operative manner: the film is divided into various "spaces," making possible various transfers or disjunctions. The workers are seen descending from the machine rooms to their homes, using the giant elevators which form part of one of the film's ruling oppositions, movement by machine/self-movement, one aspect of the central opposition Machine/Human in the film's structure of meaning.

This notion of space is central to the most daring aspect of Greimas's theories of narrative, his definition of all narrative events as some sort of real or attempted *transfer* of an *object,* accompanied by or implying a spatial discontinuity. By this criterion the first narrative function in *Metropolis* occurs in the film's second autonomous segment. Maria, as "subject," takes the group of children (the object of value) from the worker city to the "pleasure garden" on the upper level. She is forced to leave, and the unit of narrative (and the segment) is ended by the failure of this attempted transfer. This narrative unit, isolated though it seems, does not remain unconnected with the narrative as a whole, by its creation of another hero, Freder, and its anticipation of the penultimate transfer of an

object in the film, which is the return of the children to the upper level (again to the "pleasure garden") by Maria, assisted by Freder and Joseph.

This second segment of the film also introduces a second lack, this time individual rather than collective. This *manque* produces Freder as a "hero" of the narrative, for he discovers his lack of *knowledge* of the workers, which institutes the next portion of the narrative in which he descends to the machine rooms to observe the workers and witnesses the accident at the central power room. This constitutes, however, only the first stage of his acquisition of the knowledge which will enable him to act as a hero or subject in the film. The end of this portion of the narrative (and the third autonomous segment of the film) is indicated by his leaving the space of conflict, the machine rooms, to return to the upper levels with his (still incomplete) knowledge.

When Freder returns to the upper city, the residence of the ruling class, he attempts to give his father, John Frederson, his understanding of the workers' condition. Frederson at this point is simultaneously the intended destination of the object of value, knowledge, and anti-subject (traitor) who prevents its transmission. With the introduction of Frederson at this point the narrative must be interpreted simultaneously on two levels, for as an actant Frederson is the "subject" of another "story," in which the object of desire is the control (later the elimination) of the workers. For the discovery of the maps in the dead workers' clothing reveals another lack, similar to Freder's: the ruler of Metropolis lacks knowledge of the meaning of the maps, of the workers' intentions. From this point until the segment of the film in the catacombs the objects of desire sought by both father and son will be types of knowledge, which will enable them to function as hero and traitor in the decisive later stages of the narrative. In each case the knowledge will be acquired in stages. Thus, following the interview in Frederson's office, Freder redescends to the machines and Frederson goes to the inventor Rotwang's house, each in search of more adequate knowledge. At the level of expression the film emphasizes this similarity by the use of parallel editing.

Their acquisition of knowledge, this stage of which is delineated by the spaces in which both hero and traitors remain, brings them both closer to the full knowledge necessary to the power to act. Freder discovers the grueling effects of time and repeated effort by taking charge of a machine deserted by a failing worker. Frederson is shown the Robot by Rotwang, who also partially deciphers the mystery of the maps, which are revealed to be guides to the catacombs below the worker city. Again parallels are established expressively between these acquisitions of knowledge by intercutting.

In the first segment in the catacombs (which we would number as seventh segment of the film) the acquisition of knowledge for both sides is completed. Freder, his father, and Rotwang observe Maria speaking to the workers. The initial lacks of knowledge are eliminated, but reveal in each case another lack: Frederson discovers that he lacks control over the workers and Freder discovers his responsibility as "mediator." The new object of desire for both Freder and his father (through Rotwang) will be Maria, although she is desired by both as a means of obtaining another object, the workers, for their elimination (father) or liberation (son). Although Maria is still a subject or hero in the film, at this point she also becomes an object of desire.

The next narrative function in the film is the abduction of Maria by Rotwang from the catacombs to his house—a typical narrative transfer complete with spatial discontinuity. In the implied confrontation in the inventor's house between Freder and Rotwang (in the segment which follows) the latter triumphs by using machinery, which serves as helping agent to the traitors throughout the film. Freder is thus denied access to Maria whose features are trans-

ferred, quite literally, to the Robot. This is done in order to deceive Freder and the workers, that is, to transmit to them a *false knowledge*. The deception of Freder, in his father's office, removes his power to act. The function of the acquisition of knowledge in narrative is the creation of an ability to act, a *power*. Transmission of false knowledge is the classic means of neutralizing this power.

The individual deception of Freder is followed by the collective deception of the workers in the catacombs; this deception does not merely neutralize their power but converts them temporarily into traitors, allies of Frederson and Rotwang. The Robot, contrary to the real Maria, convinces the workers to act by violence for themselves, not peacefully through others, a frequent distinction made in Western narratives between traitor and hero. The children left behind in the lower city will assume the workers' actantial function as hero, as metonymic representatives of the proletariat. In these deceptions, the Robot, though a machine, is an actant and fills the role of anti-subject or traitor.

The deception of the workers, however, is followed by the restoration of Freder's power to act, by his acquisition of the knowledge that the Robot is not Maria. The workers, as traitor, subdue him. Their object, the destruction of the machines, entails the destruction of their own children, who are the final object of value in the narration. The restoration of power to the heroes continues as Maria achieves her release from Rotwang's house and prevents the destruction of the children by moving them to the upper city with the help of Freder and Joseph. The restoration of power to Freder and Maria is followed by the undeceiving of the workers and their return to the status of hero. The knowledge given them by the foreman of the powerhouse frees them from the traitors' domination. With this new status they seize and destroy the Robot, who becomes simultaneously anti-subject and object, as Maria was previously subject and object.

The second abduction of Maria by Rotwang creates one final lack to be dealt with by the hero Freder who by killing Rotwang eliminates the last of the traitors—John Frederson being transformed from traitor to hero by his son's actions. It is Freder's having saved the children which saves his father from being killed by the workers. At the end of the film, therefore, the lacks (of the subjects, not the anti-subjects) are removed, the traitors destroyed, and the imbalance which set the narrative in motion eliminated.

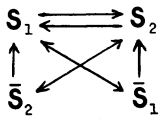
We should add parenthetically that some of the problems raised by the narrative structure of *Metropolis* stem from the fact that much of the original version of the film is missing from the copies currently available. Nonetheless the film as it exists has coherence and has been "read" easily enough by its audiences; thus our analysis has taken as its point of departure the text as we have it and not as it "should have been." In any case there is ample evidence that the original version has most of the inconsistencies which trouble the film in its current state. For a summary of these problems see Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* (London: Zwemmer, 1969).

Despite the apparent complexity of our preliminary reading, *Metropolis* does not have an inordinately complicated narrative design. The major difficulties of analysis come from the division of the functions of hero and traitor among six principal actants, with two of these switching function in the course of the film. The heroes appear in what we have considered the film's first two autonomous segments: the workers, Freder, and Maria. The traitors appear in segments five and six (in the office and Rotwang's house): John Frederson, Rotwang, and the Robot. The distribution of actants and also their order of first appearance in the text is thus symmetrical—Frederson and the workers will at times be both subject (anti-subject) and object, and Freder and Rotwang will function unambiguously as hero and traitor. This tripling of hero and traitor is maintained through a tripartite division of objects of value: the knowledge

of the proletariat, the use of Maria, and finally the children of the workers, who metonymically represent the proletariat as social entity. These three objects function in the classic order of Western narratives: knowledge, power, action.

The final simplicity of the narrative structure of *Metropolis* comes principally from the central position (functionally and diegetically) of the abduction and release of Maria. It is as if the other major portions of the film's narrative structure had been grafted onto this double transfer, without which the story cannot function. The position of Maria as object follows the classic double transfer of Propp's tales (see his *Morphology of the Folktale,* The Hague: Mouton, 1968). The traitor abducts a woman, takes her to his own space, from which she is delivered by the hero and restored to the space of society (the hero who delivers Maria in *Metropolis* being Maria herself).

Propp, however, by retaining this series of events as fixed, produced a model only applicable to the specific body of texts which he studied. Greimas adopts a mathematical-logical model with a greater power of generalization, accounting for the Russian tales *and* other possible narratives. Based on a model originally developed for a theory of semantics (in *Sémantique structurale,* Paris: Larousse, 1966), it posits an "elementary structure of meaning" which may be schematized as follows:



In this diagram $\rightleftarrows$ indicates a relationship of contrareity, $\longleftrightarrow$ relation of contradiction, and $\rightarrow$ a relation of presupposition. In the structure of meaning constructed to account for the distinction Good/Evil, for example, S_1 = good, $\overline{S}_1$ = non-good, S_2 = evil, $\overline{S}_2$ = non-evil. The semantic aspects of this model will serve us here only as a point of departure. For Propp and for *Metropolis* what counts is the application of this model to narrativity.

If we take S_1 as the hero (subject) of a narrative and S_2 as the traitor (anti-subject) and consider that the object of value circulates in a structure of meaning defined by these terms, the object transfer of Maria, like the transfer of the king's daughter in the Russian tale, may be reduced to the following equation: $F(S_1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow \overline{S}_1) \rightarrow F(\overline{S}_1 \rightarrow S_2)$, then $F(S_2 \rightarrow O \rightarrow \overline{S}_2) \rightarrow F(\overline{S}_2 \rightarrow O \rightarrow S_1)$. That is, Maria, originally in the space of society (S_1), is kidnapped by Rotwang ($\overline{S}_1$) and taken to the space of the traitors (S_2), the inventor's house. From this space (S_2) the subject Maria takes the object Maria ($\overline{S}_2$) and returns to the space of society and the heroes (S_1).

One might reasonably demand at this point what purpose is served by this elaborate procedure; in a very real sense it "explains" nothing whatever. The object (of value, we might add) of the semiotic endeavor is not explanation, of course, but *description,* precise description with as high as possible a power of generalization. (Even highly refined sciences such as physics or biochemistry "explain" little, but rather provide more and more adequate models to describe particular objects). This description makes possible comparison and hierarchization of objects and processes studied. Greimas's model is thus superior to Propp's and to other descriptions of narrativity in that it is applicable to a greater body of texts and permits, for example, a comparison between narrative sequences within a particular text and between texts of different origins. Mathematically it may also be considered superior by the principle of elegance, for fewer and simpler terms are used to describe the same object.

These considerations lead us back to *Metropolis.* For using Greimas's model we may describe a curious feature of Lang's film. The circulation of Maria as object is accompanied and paralleled by that of the Robot, which moves as follows: $F(S_2 \rightarrow O \rightarrow \overline{S}_2) \rightarrow F(\overline{S}_2 \rightarrow O \rightarrow S_1)$, then $F(S_1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow \overline{S}_1) \rightarrow F(\overline{S}_1 \rightarrow O \rightarrow S_2)$. That is, the robot (a machine, S_2) is made to appear human ($\overline{S}_2$) and transferred to the space of society (S_1). The workers, discovering their deception, seize the robot and burn it ($\overline{S}_1$) whereupon it turns back into a machine (S_2). One may easily see that the transfer of the robot is negatively symmetrical to

that of Maria, that is, its starting point is shifted 180°. The transfer depends totally on the important opposition between being and seeming, *etre* and *paraitre;* a frequent distinction between hero and traitor in Western narrative is the latter's use of *deceit.* Because of this deceit, this non-conformity between being and seeming, the transfer of the Robot to the space of the workers is as "violent" an action as the abduction of the real Maria.

The transfer of the children to the upper city at the end of the film would appear an first consideration not to have the circular nature of the first transfer of the children as object in a structure of meaning in which the terms are lack and alienation and plenitude and control. In the transfer which opens the film they are taken by Maria from the worker city, characterized by non-plenitude, to the "pleasure garden" but are forced to return, giving the inverse of the double structure characteristic of the circular and stable narrative common to the Russian folktales. The alienated status of the proletariat, whom the children represent by metonomy, is affirmed. At the film's end, the children remain on the upper level, in the "pleasure garden." Yet their status is ambiguous, and their position at the close of the film gives *Metropolis* its subtle yet profoundly reactionary orientation. For although the children seem to remain in the state of plenitude they will, as a result of the accord reached between ruling class and workers, return yet again to their original space. The result of the narrative is only a relativization of its value system, its basic oppositions, which remain unchanged. Thus the film affirms the social structure presented at its beginning. The troubling experience created by Lang's film is thus in part explicable: what appears to be socially radical in the film's overt content is negated by the deeper structure set up by its circulation of values. The reactionary narrative is often one characterized by circularity, whereas more "revolutionary" stories, such as those of Perrault (compare "Little Tom Thumb," for example, with any of the Grimm tales), terminate with the objects of value in different positions in the structures of meaning implicit in the narrative.

The oppositions established between heroes and traitors in *Metropolis,* however, do not exist in an ideological vacuum. Lang's film is a profoundly mythic text, inscribing itself in several streams of cultural discourse. We will examine here two cultural contexts of the film and also its possible insertion into the psychoanalytic system of discourse. We might divide the cultural contexts of the film into two groups dealing with political and scientific distinctions on the axis human/mechanical and with cultural and religious distinctions on the axis Christian/mystical-alchemical, both groups being parallel to the division of actants in the text into heroes and traitors.

The montage which opens the film gives an exposition of the complex of meanings which we can label "mechanical." At the most evident level of meaning this is clear from the denotative content of the shots, most of which depict parts of stylized machines. The motion of these machines is of two sorts, circular and back-and-forth, which are like two themes structuring the montage. The heavily rhythmic element introduced by the lateral motion and the circularity of the turning wheels prepare the introduction in the montage of a clock face, its shape duplicating the circular composition of many of the preceding shots and the rhythmic jerking of its hands echoing the others. The montage concludes with a shot of a whistle blowing; a title identifies "The Day Shift" which is seen in the next shot entering the elevators to descend to the worker city. It is not merely machinery which is identified with the traitors and which oppresses the workers—it is also the concept of *time,* the necessary base of the cluster of meanings which we have designated as "mechanical." Time is the measure of the repetitive effort required of the proletariat. On the other hand the "pleasure garden" in which Freder initially plays with the dark-haired girl (as opposed to Maria's lightness) is characterized precisely by being out of time, as well as removed from all types of machinery.

The opposition between the mechanical and the human is present also in the nature of the film's protagonists. Of the three principal traitors in *Metropolis,* only John Frederson, who will be transformed into a hero at the film's end, is

wholly human. The robot is, obviously, a machine, but Rotwang is also in part, having lost his right hand and replaced it with a mechanical one during the robot's construction. Thus the inventor is an embodiment of this central tension: he is half human and half machine, on the metonymic level of the hands. It is, significantly, his right, mechanical hand which Frederson shakes after first seeing the robot in action. Shortly afterward, Frederson also shakes the robot's hand; his transformation to hero will be signalled at the end of the film by his shaking for the first time a fully human hand, that of the foreman.

This master opposition is also present in a less consistent manner in methods of transportation depicted in the film. When the workers, oppressed by the ruling class, go to and from work they use the elevators, helping agents for the traitors, whereas when they descend to the catacombs to hear Maria they do so on foot. When the workers go as traitor to destroy the machines, their position as actant is underlined by their use of the elevators—the very sort of machinery which they wish to eliminate. Freder, Maria, and Joseph take the children to the upper levels by purely "human" effort. These oppositions inscribe themselves in an almost Marxist discourse; they therefore contribute to the paradoxical nature of the film. The deep narrative structure, which we can justly characterize as reactionary, belies the contexts into which the production of this meaning is inserted.

A second sort of discourse alluded to in *Metropolis* is of a religious dimension. This is most evident in the names of the protagonists, Joh Frederson ("John" in the English titles does not suggest "Jehova" as well as the German), Maria, Joseph, and Freder, who is most often referred to simply as "the son" or "Joh Frederson's son." (Joseph, we might add, has a less important role than Maria, the Father, and the Son, as befits the Western religious tradition.)

But there is a consistent opposition present between the vague Christianity present in so much of the film and another tradition, mystical and alchemical, most evident in the connotations produced by the presentation of Rotwang. He is portrayed as a sort of medieval sorcerer (and his robot will be burned like a witch); compared to the archtypically Aryan appearances of Freder and Maria the inventor looks distinctly Semitic. On his door and above the robot in his laboratory is a five-pointed star. He lives alone in a curiously distorted, old-fashioned house, set apart from the rest of society. His "science" is occult and solitary.

The opposing, Christian tradition is most apparent in Maria and Freder. The latter, working at the curious circular machine during his second visit to the machine rooms, is quite clearly crucified on the hands of the clock face which appears behind the controls. Maria is clearly and uncomplicatedly associated with Christian teachings. In the catacombs, when she relates the tale of the Tower of Babel there emerges a curious juxtaposition of the Christian and mystic elements opposed in the text. Maria stands in front of numerous crucifixes, viewed reverently from below by the workers. As the shots appear which illustrate her story (differentiated from surrounding shots by a circular masking) it is apparent that the builders of the tower are visually and verbally equated with the tradition represented by Rotwang, that of the arrogant and occult "scholar." Even the clothing worn by the planners of the tower is similar to that of the inventor.

There is also a third manner in which the text, though less directly this time, may be viewed as inserting itself into larger contexts, into an "intertextual space." This aspect of *Metropolis* is composed of structures analyzable in psychoanalytic terms. We will mention here only Oedipal aspects of the film and the presence of elements suggesting a sort of "death wish." Through the cultural and political grids we have referred to above a three-membered "family" is created. Frederson, as leader of society and as a "Jehova" figure, becomes the Father. Freder, as the ruler's son, as representative of the workers, and as Christ, is the Son. Finally Maria, in her religious context and as spiritual creator of Freder and the workers—for it is she who reveals to them their respective *manques,* creating them as individual consciousnesses — is the Mother. Freder, to negate and assume the power of the Father, must have access to the Mother—

which is precisely what is prevented by the abduction of Maria. He will see the robot in Maria's image in the hands of his father, which of course produces his lack of power (castration). Thus the film portrays an individual and collective, Oedipal and primal revolt against the Father, for Maria is also Mother to the masses. The father is retained at the end of the film only in a partially castrated form (he *kneels* on the ground while his son fights Rotwang). That Frederson is not killed outright, but merely stripped of some of his power which is transmitted only to the Son and not to the workers indicates the repressed, compromised nature of the Oedipal conflict in *Metropolis*.

But the film, and indeed most of Lang's work, lends itself also to an analysis in terms of life and death instincts. The preservation of culture itself is at stake in the prevention of Frederson's projected destruction of the workers. There is a persistent identification in the film of the machines and hence the traitors with death, both of the individual and of the structure of society. This is further identified with the pagan/mystic tradition, as when Freder sees the accident in the central power room as a sacrifice to the god Moloch. In a curious way this death tendency is portrayed as belonging to nature as opposed to culture (this of course is perfectly consistent with Freud's thought). Thus when the central powerhouse is destroyed, it is the released *water* which threatens to kill the children. Culture is always dangerously near a breakdown under the forces of nature. The maintenance of culture is the responsibility of the heroes. In most of Lang's work, particularly in his German silent period, there exist powerful forces for the end of culture, individuals whose goal is total destruction: Mabuse in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* or Haghi in *Spione* are perhaps the clearest examples.

Whether one wishes to consider these cultural and psychoanalytic contexts of the inscription of narrativity in *Metropolis* as primary or secondary as compared to "deeper" structures of the text depends purely on the perspective chosen for the analysis. In this study we have attempted to give more or less equal weight to

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the various levels of elaboration posited by Greimas. At the "deepest" level are the elementary structures of meaning which, anthropomorphized, produce the notions of "actions" and "characters" which with insertion into larger contexts are elaborated into the immediately accessible narration. In this analysis we have stopped short of considering the nature of the inscription of the film itself, how the text produces meaning from moment to moment: codes of lighting or representation of actions, the function of titles, methods of editing and composition, etc. This would be another aspect of the study of the text and an extremely interesting one. Hopefully, however, through this limited work on the profoundly resonant text of *Metropolis* we have suggested some of the levels of structuration involved in the analysis of the production of meaning through narration.

CAREL ROWE

ILLUMINATING LUCIFER

The title, L-U-C-I-F-E-R R-I-S-I-N-G, rises in vibrating fiery letters from the waves of the ocean. Throughout *Lucifer* neon calligraphy and animated symbols flash, sometimes simultaneously matted into the landscapes of ancient Egypt. Often these electrified talismans break into the material like signals from lost civilizations: picture-writing erupting through layers of history. *Lucifer's* universe is populated with signaling gods and alchemical symbols. The work, at this stage, is largely concerned with communication between Isis (Myriam Gibril) and Osiris (Donald Cammell), through the forces of nature; this communion of natural elements provokes meteorological reactions in preparation for Lucifer's arrival: lightning issues forth from the staffs and emblems of these radiant deities; nature replies with rosy dawns, whirlpools, and emissions of molten rock. The sun goes into eclipse. Intercut with an endless torchlight procession, Lilith (Marianne Faithfull) climbs the prehistoric stairway to a Celtic shrine where, as goddess of the moon, she supplicates the sun. The sun rises directly in the center of the solstice altar; its rays part to reveal a scarlet demon within the round hole of the rock: the blazing astrological symbol of Mercury (god of communication and ruler of magicians) appears. A magus (Kenneth Anger) stalks around his incandescent magic circle in invocation to the Bringer of Light (cf. Murnau's *Faust.)* Outside the smoking circle a Balinese fire demon (symbol of sacrifice) materializes, the magus bows before the idol, a globe of phosphorescent lightning shudders across the screen and Lucifer, resplendent in satin L-U-C-I-F-E-R jockey jacket, arises from within the circle. In response, nature throws a celebration of volcanic eruptions and avalanches of snow, and, ultimately, an electrical storm over Stonehenge. Isis and Osiris, the happy parents (of Lucifer-as-Horus) stride through the colonnade at Karnak to greet their offspring and a feldspar-colored saucer sails at us from behind the stone head of Ramses II.

After six years of self-imposed exile in London, Kenneth Anger is touring the US with a retrospective of his work and the première of the first third of his first feature, *Lucifer Rising.* This work-in-progress is a remake and continuation of the sabotaged "Love Vision" of *Lucifer* begun seven years ago in San Francisco. The original was to have been about "today's new tribes of teenagers, turned-on children—teeny-boppers and adolescent hippies" and featured